

KRAPP — AUTHORITY OF LAW IN LANGUAGE

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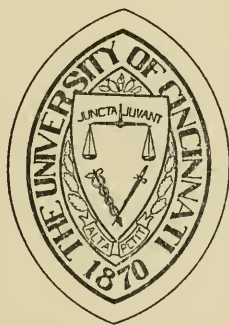
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## The Authority of Law in Language

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## THE AUTHORITY OF LAW IN LANGUAGE

The endeavor to determine the authority of law in language is beset with not a few difficulties. Perhaps the first and greatest of these difficulties lies in finding out exactly the nature of law in language. That laws of language exist is, indeed, a general and natural assumption. We are inclined to take it for granted, in language as in everything else, that this is an orderly and well regulated universe. But the existence of law of some kind being thus assumed, the important matter is the determination of just what meaning we shall give to this term law as it is applied to language. The subject is one which from the beginnings of the modern scientific study of language, and, for that matter, from the days of Plato, has engaged the deepest interest of philosophers and philologists. By the technical linguists of modern times it has usually been approached from the most obviously physical side of language, from the side of phonetics.<sup>1</sup> Any general conception of law in language, however, must apply not only to phonetics, but to all the manifestations of language, to forms, to syntax, to everything which enters into the composition of language. It may seem an ambitious project to attempt to discuss within the brief compass of an essay the varied significance of the subject of the authority of law in these different applications. We may hope to find, however, that the ideas which will have to be considered are of wider bearing than might at first be supposed, and that they are at least of sufficiently general value to justify an examination of the subject from so comprehensive a point of view.

It is hardly necessary to bestow more than a passing glance upon the old notion of the completely objective existence of language, of its creation and regulation by some kind of law-giver, and of its consequent possession of a native and inherent system of law which may be dogmatically applied. This old belief often took the form of statement that language is an organism as truly

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1. See Wechssler's essay, 'Giebt es Lautgesetze,' *Indogermanische Forschungen*, 1900. Wechssler gives a full bibliography of the subject. To Wechssler's list may be added Professor Henry Cecil Wyld's inaugural address, *Law in Language*, Liverpool, 1900. Professor Wyld also limits his discussion to phonetic law.

as any object of the physical world is an organism; it assumed that language may be as completely dissociated from man as stock or stone may be. The simple answer to all this is that language, unlike the stock or stone, has no existence that we are conscious of apart from the activities of the minds of individual, living, human beings. The recorded historical forms of language as we know them in literature, in dictionaries, and in descriptive grammars are, of course, not language any more than the mummy of an Egyptian Pharaoh is a man. The language of literature may be re-created in the minds of living beings, but then it is not the language of the printed page which exists, but each reader's fresh interpretation of that language which makes it vivid and significant to the mind occupied by it. In no conceivable way can language be thought of as an external organism; it must be regarded as a manifestation of mind, and whatever structure or rule or law it may have must be found in the processes of living minds.

It is interesting to observe how the comparatively old science of philology has in this respect attained a solid footing, whereas the relatively new science of sociology is still floundering in the mire of the antiquated theory of the objective existence of or counterpart to mental or psychological activities. In a recent summary of the present state of sociological inquiry Professor Giddings<sup>1</sup> has put side by side the two modern methods of sociological study. On the one hand, he says, are those who insist that 'the typical society, consisting of individuals both dwelling and working together, is as truly an organism as is the animal or vegetal body composed of cells and differentiated into mutually dependent tissues and organs.' The other point of view is assumed by those who conceive society as a 'superorganic product,' and who regard it 'as essentially a psychological phenomenon. They assume that all social bonds, instead of being merely physical, like the cohesion of material cells, may be resolved into some common activity or interactivity of individual minds.' Applying the same general principles to the study of language, there can hardly be any question that the second view is right. Language, which is merely one of the manifestations of social grouping, has its real existence in the common activity or interactivity of individual minds.

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1. Giddings, *Sociology*, New York, 1908, p. 30.



It is possible to evade the more difficult problems that arise in the consideration of law in language and still arrive at results which must be dignified by the name of law. Thus by the simplest process of observation similars may be grouped together. As a child playing with pebbles may put all the white ones in this heap and all the black ones in that, so the student of language may group the phenomena of language according to the principle of obvious similarity. He may thus put all of his pronouns following verbs into one class and arrive at a statement of the law for that class—that a pronoun after the verb takes the form of the objective case. Such law is merely descriptive, and to the historian or to the philosopher or the psychologist it has in itself little interest. Its function is to lay out the materials in orderly fashion with which the explaining student is to work. The method followed is altogether external; it groups phenomena together which to the observation seem to be similar, but which for the more curious inquirer have to be tested by some deeper principle than that of outer similarity before they can be finally accepted as a real grouping of similars. It is only to the practical student of language that such a descriptive method has any value; for him it is not necessary to go beyond these simple laws of observation based upon apparent similarity, and in his practice the question of the authority of these laws hardly arises.

The deeper principle which is to be added to the observation of externals in the grouping of similars is the principle of causal explanation, giving rise to causal laws. It should be quite clear that a causal statement of a phenomenon or a group of phenomena is not the same thing as a description of them. A description of the sound *t*, for example, would be a statement of such and such an effect upon the ear. But a causal explanation of the sound must consider its origins, the position of the tongue against the upper gums, the expulsion, checking, and sudden loosing of the breath which actually forms the sound. A causal law is thus seen to be a mechanical law in the sense that it shows by what processes results are obtained; it reveals the mechanism of an action. Still further back of the mechanical causal law is, of course, that kind of law which is designated as teleological, the law of final cause. But teleological law carries us over into the region of metaphysics. and so far we need not at present venture. It will be more to our

present purpose to carry a little further the analysis of mechanical causal and descriptive law.

A descriptive law is usually easier to arrive at and, at the same time, is of less certain value than a causal statement or law. The latter tends to be self-convincing, apodeictic. If its facts are right and its methods are sound the results are felt to be necessary. A descriptive generalization, on the other hand, is often shown not to be a law by the application of causal principles. Facts which to the observation seem similar may really be diverse, and a descriptive law may cover the ground of several causal laws; in other words, by the application of causal explanations we often give up old and accept new principles for the holding together of similars. A familiar illustration of this may be cited from architecture. It is well known that the Gothic style, in the architect's system of classification, consists not in the pointed arch, not even in the flying buttress, for these may be and in fact often are nothing more than external and ornamental in their application. But the explaining principle of classification, the causal statement of the quality of Gothic style, is to be found in a principle of construction often concealed to the external observer, the principle of push and thrust in the support of vaulting. In language the causal or mechanical principle must be continually called into service for the sake of correcting the errors of descriptive generalization. We know from their explanation and origin that the two words, the verb *hold* and the noun the *hold* of a ship (originally the *hole* of a ship), although they have somewhat similar or at least conceivably related meanings, are not historically the same word. So also must we explain by causal principles how one form, for example, English *lean*, meaning 'slender' and the verbal idea, 'to lean,' or *strain*, meaning 'stock, race,' and 'to strain,' can have various meanings. In the same way we must explain how one meaning may assume different forms, for example, *regal*, *royal*, *real*, and in countless ways the mechanical explanation is called in to supplement and correct external observation.

To the student of to-day the meaning which is given to the conception of causal law is very much colored by the applications of that law in the study of the natural sciences. Our first thought at the mention of the term law is of the mechanical laws of physical matter. It will be well, therefore, to examine for a moment



the conception of causal law from this point of view before we attempt to test its value and authority as applied to language.

If we had a causal law for every phenomenon, the natural scientists tell us, we should have a perfectly clear, intelligible, and predictable universe. This assertion and belief obviously imply that a causal law always operates in the same way and always has the same result. Thus two parts of hydrogen added to one part of oxygen always produces water, and if we can be sure of anything, says the scientist, we can be sure that the combination always will produce water. It is assumed that when a different result enters, the law which has been supposed to explain the facts is not a real law but that more than one law is present; that is, that the grouping which was made was only descriptive and needs a further analysis into its real and varied causal principles. In the form of a rule this theory may be stated thus: like causes produce like effects and the same cause always produces the same effect. This is not the place to enter into any discussion of the credibility of the statements of this rule. They are plainly dogmas, that is, probabilities raised to the position of general laws by our strong belief in them. They are not susceptible of immediate proof, since we cannot prove such unqualified universals. Disregarding, therefore, the question of the ultimate truth of these principles, we shall find it more profitable to consider in how far this conception of law applies to language.

First of all it should be observed that language as a concept has none of the definiteness, of the necessity, and of the firmness of a natural substance. Hydrogen is hydrogen and water is water the world over. Language, to be sure, is expression; but expression is not necessarily vocal—it may be gesture and make its appeal to the eye instead of the ear. To define language with clearly marked limits it is necessary first to settle more or less arbitrarily on the definition. Just when does the babbling of a child cease to be mere babbling and become language? Are the vocal utterances of animals ever to be dignified with the name of language? The truth is that language is not a positive power, a faculty, a something by virtue of the possession of which man is man. It is rather adventitious than necessary to human life, and in its various manifestations it passes imperceptibly into and partakes of many different aspects of life. It is one of those human activities which the definiteness of our terminology sometimes

leads us to suppose we thoroughly understand, but which seem the vaguer the more we try to make our ideas of them solid and distinct.

If language is not to be thought of as a human activity, sharply marked off from every other human activity, as a detachable unit in the human composition, how is it when we come to consider the processes of language? Are they simple and distinct, and do they exhibit such necessary and uniform mechanical laws as are to be observed in the natural world? To answer these questions it will be necessary to examine some of the typical processes of language. For this purpose we may take an illustration from phonetics and another from syntax, the assimilation of consonants for the one and the rules or concord for the other. Since sound is largely physical, both on the side of its production and its reception, it is in the sounds of language if anywhere that language laws might be supposed to operate as they do with natural phenomena; and in the assimilation of consonants we have one of the most obviously physical set of phonetic phenomena to consider that language offers. The simplest statement of this rule, or law, of assimilation is that when two consonants of unlike kind, that is, a voiced and a voiceless consonant, come into juxtaposition, one is assimilated to the other—the voiceless consonant either becomes voiced or the voiced consonant becomes voiceless. The words *race*, *raced* illustrate one process, *thief*, *thieves* the other. But exception must be made of the linguals and nasals; for the purposes of this law, they must be regarded not as consonants, since pairs like *cold*, *colt*; *rend*, *rent*; *crammed*, *cramped* (the *p* is merely orthographic and is no more present in sound than a *b* is in *crammed*) show that they combine with equal ease with either voiced or voiceless consonants. This is restriction number one. A second limitation of the rule requires that the consonants shall be in the same syllable. Words like *south-down*, or *hot-bed*, or *foot-ball* consequently fall out of the rule, although with the consonants of these words we may observe more or less tendency towards assimilation. Another limitation must be recognized which arises out of the fact that the division of consonants into voiced and voiceless is not based on an absolute difference of kind. It is not a difference of nature, but a difference of degree, as is the distinction between vowel and consonant. Vowels shade over into consonants imperceptibly, and voiced consonants are distinguished

from voiceless at the dividing line only by minute degrees of difference. Thus the final consonant following a guttural *k*, in the combination of *kd* in *book'd*, is more voiced, or at least is likely to be more voiced, than the final consonant of *drop'd*.

It would not be difficult to find a physiological explanation why this should be so, but at present we are merely concerned with the fact that voiced and voiceless consonants should not be thought of as absolute and definitely different in their values, like two physical elements, but merely as stages in an unbroken sequence. Finally, not to delay too long over our list of restrictions, which indeed might be increased almost indefinitely, the law of assimilation can operate only when there is no positive intention on the part of the speaker to prevent it. Thus if the speaker wills to do so, for any reason whatsoever, he may pronounce the final *d* of *drop'd* as a voiced sound, and so with any other consonant in any possible combination. There is nothing essentially impossible in the combination of a voiced and voiceless consonant, and any speaker may at any moment produce such a combination. English poetry is full of illustrations, of which one from *Richard III*, V, III, 119, will suffice:

"Think, how thou stabb'dst me in my prime of youth."

Manifestly all these restrictions suppose a kind of activity very different from the way in which the phenomena of the natural world act. The two parts of hydrogen and the one of oxygen which unite to form water are, in the first place, quite separate and distinct from each other; they are not supposed to be joined by gradual connecting links, but each exists for and by itself. Moreover, when they are combined they not only show a tendency of development, but they show a certain and positive development. There is nothing inherent in them separately or in their result when combined which is able to change or prevent their action. On the other hand, in every phonetic development there is something inherent in the processes of language which enters to assist, to retard, or even prevent a probable phonetic development. From the very nature of language it is consequently impossible to speak of phonetic laws with the same meaning that we give to natural physical law. In phonetics we have always a tendency of development or change, conditioned by a multitude of helping or restraining tendencies which bring about an infinity of degrees in the phonetic process; in the physical world when a

change takes place it is definitely ponderable, measurable, limitable in some way, its results are clear and certain, and the whole is capable of reduction to the form of an exact law, not merely the statement of a probable tendency.

If we find that phonetic processes, which of all the activities of language afford the closest parallel to natural, physical activities, cannot be explained by the same kind of law that the physicist uses to explain natural phenomena, still less should we expect the other and more psychological activities of language to be explainable by that kind of law. The forms of syntax, the colors and developments in meaning of words, the cadences and tunes of speech, all these are language processes which are subject to some kind of law or cause, but plainly not to a fixed and necessary causal law like that we have been discussing. For illustration we may take the syntactical law that a verb agrees with its subject in person and number. First of all this law can have application only to an inflectional language, like the members of the Indo-Germanic family of languages. In an isolative language like Chinese, where there is no formal concord, the law could have no meaning. In an inflectional language, however, it supposes that when a subject is plural number or singular number, first, second, or third person, the verb will have a distinctive form and feeling corresponding respectively to these different categories of the subject. When we come to apply the law to any language, or any period of a language, we find that practically the law is again nothing more than the statement of a general tendency, that this general tendency is interrupted at various points often to such an extent as to destroy the general value of the law. In modern English, for example, the feeling for personal concord between verb and subject is almost completely lost. In the past tense of all verbs it is altogether lacking, and in the modal auxiliaries also for the present. A singular verb may be used with plural subject, as in the sentence, *More than one man has crossed Brooklyn Bridge*, where the logical force of the subject is certainly plural, and a singular subject may be used with plural verb, as in *You were not the man*, where the logical force of the subject is certainly singular. To call these exceptions to the law, or to explain them by subtle logical distinctions not present in the normal linguistic consciousness is, of course, begging the question. The real fact seems to be that, although often we do have a feeling for concord in number between subject and verb, at times this feeling is in abeyance. The general tendency

or law is temporarily suspended and the test or requirement or convention, whatever you wish to call it, of concord is not applied. Every grammatical category will be found on analysis to fray off at its edges into such ambiguities and uncertainties of classification. What we call law or rule is merely a convenient but strictly unjustifiable descriptive generalization covering only a part of the facts. To give it any other than this inexact meaning is to proceed from a priori theory, and not from the ground of actual practice.

We must add something, therefore, to our conception of the causal mechanical laws of language. The great difference between language and the natural world which makes the principle of causal explanation of differing value as applied to the two, is the necessary presence of something in the former which is never present in the latter. In language the elements of mind and volition always enter; in the natural world, so far as we can see at present, they never enter. Perhaps mutation as it is at present studied in plant life is to be explained on the basis of the presence of some kind of mind or will in matter. Perhaps an exceptionally endowed plant may be able to determine for itself that it will not be like its fellows, but will be something different. Perhaps also a very exceptionally endowed atom of oxygen may, conceivably in the future if it never has done so in the past, decide that it will combine with two elements of hydrogen, not to produce water, but something new and unknown to gods or men. Whether this is probable or not in the physical world, we know it is true in the mental. Volition is constantly bringing about mutation in language. Not every process produces something new and striking, for the will may act merely as repetition in the formation of habit, and of speech habits more will be said later. But the important thing to remember is that at any moment the volitional process may produce something new. At any moment we may have a language "sport", a language creation, which may run counter to all other volitional acts in its group. It is for this reason that we cannot speak of causal law as applied to language in the same way as we speak of causal law as applied to the natural world. All normal language processes are volitional processes, and the question of uniformity, or regularity, in language is consequently not a question of necessary results from similar causes, but a question why volitional acts should be repeated in individuals



and in groups of individuals. The extent of the volitional character of language may be seen from the possibility of complete inhibition. This is not conceivable in the physical world. Gold must glitter and the diamond must shine. But in language a cause may be without an effect. There may be no expression even in the presence of the strongest incentive to expression. The will may annihilate what it can create, but the natural world has no choice but to obey the conditions of its existence.

To cite even a small part of the many ways in which uniformity of tendency, or regularity, or repetition, or law, in this sense, is brought about in the volitional processes of language would be manifestly impossible within the brief limits of this paper. Only a few can be mentioned in order to illustrate the nature of law in language and to furnish the basis for some reflections on the proper attitude towards such law. First of all, however, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the way in which volition first enters into language and the way in which conscious volitional acts pass over into unconscious habitual acts.

The psychologists are accustomed to make a distinction between what they call ideomotor activities and volitional activities. By ideomotor activities they mean such as are produced without choice or intention; such activities are merely the unwilled expression of an image on the brain—for example, somebody yawns and everybody else within seeing distance unconsciously does the same. Image actions of this sort were probably very important factors in the primitive development of language. The primitive speaker heard a sound and, without meaning anything by it, he unwittingly imitated that sound. It is in this way partly that a child is still taught to speak. The parent repeats a word, say *Dada*, some dozen or twenty or fifty times, until the image of that word is definitely fixed in the child's mind, when by this tendency to ideomotor activity the child utters the word. The proud parent is immediately entranced because his child has spoken. But has he spoken? Is the mere unwilled expression of a motor impulse speech? No, for there must still be added something else on the child's part; there must be added choice, will, intention. The child must design to convey a significance by means of his word, and only when he does so are all the elements of a linguistic process present. After that at any moment the volitional process may



become expressive, may become something which is not merely the reflection of a mental image.

Habit in language operates much as it does in other human activities. The effects of habit in many actions are quite familiar to us. The piano player through long years of practice is enabled to perform feats of rapid action with his fingers which at the beginning he could hardly imagine. As he grows in skill he not only performs these feats with physical ease, but he performs them without any effort of will. His fingers seem to move, to play, of themselves. And so with many other activities. Constant drill and practice does away with the necessity of giving thought to the method of an activity. The skillful marksman does not need to stop and take aim, he fires and hits the mark immediately, almost by instinct as we say. Now there is perhaps no human activity in which we are so constantly and perfectly drilled as in the activities of speech. Before the child begins to walk he exercises his tongue and the other vocal muscles in the formation of speech-sounds. And from the days of infancy to his last hours the speaking being is engaged in drilling himself in the art of speech. The result is that all speech activities tend to become highly developed and stable habits. Most speakers are, of course, extremely conventional in the set of speech-habits which they acquire. Our human race has lived so long, the usual and normal experiences of life have occurred so frequently, that in the course of time everybody acquires forms of speech expressive of those constantly recurring experiences. Thus when I meet my neighbor coming out of his gate in the morning, I say *How do you do?* or *Good-morning*. I do this without the slightest effort; the words fall as glibly and easily from my tongue as the notes do from the fingers of the skillful pianist. A great part of our speech, more perhaps than we suppose, is made up of just such habitual, colorless expression. Speech of this kind closely resembles those ideomotor activities just mentioned. When I see my neighbor coming out of his gate a part of the image in my mind is a greeting, and so the greeting involuntarily slips out in order that the picture may be complete. For most of the occasions of daily life we have just such habitual, ideomotor expressions, consecrated by long use, but in themselves almost but never completely lacking in personal color or intention on the part of the speaker. I need hardly call attention to the fact that in the minds of most men there is a deep-

rooted hostility towards any departure from these fixed habits. That which is familiar seems good and right, and rational arguments stand little show when they come in conflict with ancient and established custom. But the important matter to note for present purposes is that no habitual speech-activity could have been in the beginning a habit. It must have become such by repetition, just as the pianist's unconscious dexterity must have been acquired by slow and painful individual acts of his will. The first person who said *Good-morning* to his neighbor must have meant something by it, and the second and the third, and all succeeding persons who used the phrase before it became a mechanical conventional habit. In their origins, therefore, all language expressions were intended to convey meaning, and if they were intended to convey meaning, then they were volitional activities. For us today, who are enriched, or burdened, as you please, with a great inherited gift of conventional expression, it is necessary to add to or depart from, in some way to vary the stock of habitual expression, if we wish to be positively expressive. In other words, positive expression is as much today a matter of intention, of free volition as it ever was. We differ from the primitive speaker only in this, that we have at our disposal a greater supply of negative weakened habitual expressions which relieves us from the absolute necessity of exerting our wills if we wish to be lazy, and that in order to be positively expressive we must rise superior to the vast network of habit which more and more tends to entangle, even to strangle our own free, individual activity.

In its simplest forms the volitional choice of the material of language is doubtless largely determined by physical facts. The choice of the voice as the medium of expression rather than gesture is due to the greater economy and effectiveness of vocal expression as compared with all other kinds of expression. In the same way the selection of the specific sounds which go to make up a language is probably to some extent determined by convenience, or, in the old phrase, "ease of utterance." This is a principle or law which is of undoubted validity in assisting in the explanation of some developments, especially phonetic developments, like the assimilation of consonants, mutation or umlaut, and a few others in which the physical side of language is prominent. But mental suggestion is certainly an important factor in these changes, and it would be easy to exaggerate the principle

of physiological economy or ease in the explanation of language changes. In umlaut, for example, the theory of physiological ease is quite inadequate as an explanation of the change. Here, as ever, we have to do with mental activities, and these may at any moment rise superior to any of the so-called natural, physiological necessities.

The widest degree of volitional uniformity is brought about by the necessity of the symbolic value of language. Vocal sounds in truly primitive conditions of human life were largely individually expressive. Whatever uniformity they may have had was the result of uniform physical conditions, mainly the similarity of the organs of voice and of the environment surrounding the speaking animals. As such, vocal sound was not yet specifically language. Language is a different species of vocal sound, to use the terminology of the natural sciences, formed by the addition of a new element—that is, the symbolic value of uttered sound. This imposing of symbolic value upon speech sounds is a volitional process and at the same time a segregating and generalizing process. From the vast number of possible sounds and combinations of sounds some certain few are selected by a speech community for its purposes of speech communication. The precise selection which it makes is apparently not determined by any necessity but seems to be free act of will. Speech communities closely related geographically and ethnologically often choose different speech elements. Each has the power of the speech elements of the other, but through differing initial acts of choice, confirmed by the repetition of the general community through imitation in the formation of community speech habits, differing sets of symbols become established. The conditions determining selection are therefore not single and simple, but various and complex. Within a group the prime necessity for similar choice arises from the desire of intelligibility. If an idea is to be expressed symbolically by two or more persons they must first of all agree as to the value of the symbols. The degree of such common understanding in language is extraordinarily great. The majority of the speech symbols of a language have an understood and fairly defined value. There is, of course, no such thing as a completely homogeneous speech community; the common understanding of the value of speech symbols is never more than approximate and practical. Yet the body of these understood speech symbols is so great

and the feeling for them is so certain that we do not usually think of them as the laws of the language, as they of course are. The question of law usually arises when attention is called to an accepted symbolic value by a departure from it. It is from this latter point of view that the practical student is most concerned with the question of law in language. The philosophic student would, however, explain all laws. He would explain not only the exceptions, the laws that account for smaller groups in the large groups, but also the large groups themselves. He would explain not only why the third singular ends in *s* in Modern English, but also why the Indo-Germanic languages are inflected and others are not. He would explain not only how Old English *cild* becomes Modern English *child*, but also how and why all sound-changes have taken place. He would explain how words have acquired the functional values which we designate the parts of speech, how they have acquired the complicated and subtle significances which we give them, how they are united into the groupings and cadences of speech. The mere suggestion of some of the vast problems called up by the thought of explaining all the integrating volitional processes of past periods in language shows the impossibility of doing so. We can pick out a little point here and there and form more or less satisfactory theories about it; but we can no more reconstruct the past life of a language than we can reconstruct the past life of a people's general political and social beliefs and customs, or the life of an individual. The remoter the life one attempts to reconstruct the less certain the results are bound to be. All attempts at such historical interpretation must necessarily be hypothetical, theoretical, inferential. They can never become certain because the conditions cannot be repeated as in the case of physical experiment. If social acts, as we have assumed, are dependent only on the volitional impulses of individuals, allowance must necessarily always be made for these individual impulses. But if there is one thing of which we cannot speak with certainty, it is as to what is taking place or has taken place behind the brow of our neighbor, especially of our long dead neighbor, and this is a lack of certainty that must always infect the interpretations of the so-called historical and social sciences.

For the student of the processes of language a much more practical and fruitful field of observation and speculation lies in

present use, both individual and community. It would be an interesting effort to describe down to the minutest detail the actual speech conditions of an individual, or better, of a closely related group, in order to show by just what acts each speaker determines his characteristics. When it comes to the examination of community habit, in spite of great similarity as the result of imitation and that pressure towards conformity which the social group always brings, it would certainly be found that complete homogeneity did not exist in any community. Perfect homogeneity implies identity in the value of all speech symbols of the persons in the community. In such a community misunderstanding would not need to be guarded against because it could never occur. Perfect similarity of intention would always be followed by perfect similarity of result. But a community of this kind exists only as an ideal abstraction. We cannot conceive of a body of people detached and self-containing without differentiation of group and group, or individual and individual. We may imagine a small tribe shut up in a valley for a long period of time and cut off from all communication with the outer world as coming nearest to it. But actually such tribes are not known. There is always differentiation. Even the most secluded mountain valley, the loneliest island in the South Seas, has its pastor or priest, its head-man, and its distinctions of caste of some sort. Even the variety of its trades and occupations necessitates variety in the characteristics of speech of its inhabitants. Homogeneity is always only approximate. Since will is always present the law of imitation, the tendency toward social congruity, can never become absolute until individuality disappears. Complete homogeneity is therefore an assumption, an ideal and subjective creation, which in reality has only its suggestion in the tendency of the facts. Heterogeneity, on the other hand, is necessary, and it is possible for it to exist without injury to language by the rule of negligible variation. No speech-community has ever demanded perfect homogeneity, since it is not necessary for the purposes of satisfactory, intelligible communication. Communication is largely through the imagination. All that is absolutely required is some indication of the intention of the communicating person, and then the recipient willingly fills in the content of the communication. Assuming, therefore, that homogeneity tending towards the formation of community habits is the trend or tendency of



development in speech, conditioned by its symbolic value, although in its completeness it can never be realized, it may be of interest to point out a few of the ways in which homogeneity is prevented in the practical use of language:

(1) We may have, first of all, partial survivals of earlier habitual uses. The general tendency in a community may have changed, but former uses of the same community may persist here and there. Instances of this are very numerous in the history of language. The present popular pronunciation of *recognize* as *rekonize*, without the *g*, was formerly general, but it is now giving away or, perhaps we should say, has given away, under the influence of orthography, to a new general tendency. In the condition contrary to fact, *e. g.*, *If I were you*, the old general habit, persists pretty strongly, but beside it a new one is arising, *If I* contrary to fact, *e. g.*, *If I were you*, the old general habit. There is an old fashioned pronunciation of the word *deaf* with same quality of vowel as have the words *sheaf*, *sheep*, *leap*, etc. Historically the vowels of *deaf* and *leap* are of the same origin, and formerly the pronunciation of *deaf* like *sheaf* was not only historically correct but was also customary good use.

(2) We may have mixed speech due to the combination of members of differing geographical or social speech communities, and consequently of different speech habits, into one community. The new members for some time will not be completely assimilated. The degree of difference varies in extent from the speech of the recognized foreigner who speaks the language with an accent, as we say, and who uses unidiomatic syntax, to the speech of a person whose outer origin can be inferred only from an occasional dialectal word or pronunciation, as for example, an Americanized Englishman who should continue to speak of *luggage*, the New Englander who should speak of his *shoes* as his *boots*, or the cultivated speaker who should retain popular pronunciations such as *futher* for *further*, *idear* for *idea*, etc.

(3) Differences of tendency may arise also from a number of causes much more personal and individual in character. In pronunciation, for example, we have within a group widely varying degrees of energy in enunciation. The physical organisms of some speakers are keenly sensitive to the auditory side of speech and their minds act in accordance. They hear and feel sounds sharply and distinctly and consequently exert themselves to pro-



duce them sharply and distinctly. Others, on the contrary, hear vaguely and indistinctly; their speech tunes are always a little sharp or flat or a little blurred. This difference of energy in enunciation is not necessarily appreciated as a mark of different speech grouping. It is characteristic of speakers who, in the common social understanding, belong to the same group. The speech of any given community is energetic in varying degrees. Thus a word like *very* has many different pronunciations, clearly distinguishable to the ear but difficult of representation in spelling. They range all the way from a tense, energetic pronunciation almost the same as *vary* to a vague and loose *vurry*. The difference is largely dependent on personality—at least on that side of personality which has to do with response to auditory impressions. The speaker of dull auditory sensibility tends towards such pronunciations as *Satday*, *flosophy*, *errs* (errors), etc., where the speaker of keen auditory sense tends toward a clear-cut and precise manner of enunciation.

(4) Still more personal is the variety of ideal impulse which may color language. This is a matter of quite conscious intent and striving. Conscious ideals in language are a mark of sophistication rather than natural use, but the degree of conscious reflection in language is surprisingly great. It is a mistake to suppose that only the so-called educated and cultivated speakers indulge in conscious theorizing in speech; the popular mind is just as sophisticated, as full of ideas and notions about language as the educated mind is of opinions and facts. The origin of these conscious reflections is various. They may arise from the sense of respect for the authority of another person or of another group, the social activities of which as a whole are admired—for example, the supposedly elegant pronunciation of *either*, *neither*, rhyming with *blither*; or the broad *a* in *tomatoes*, *branches*, *dance*, etc. Or the authority of conventional spelling may be raised to the position of conscious authority —e. g. *good deal* instead of *good eal*, *Magdalen* instead of *Maudlin*. The pronunciation cited above, *rekonize*, had to give way to a conscious spelling pronunciation in *recognize*; in *recognisance* the theory has not yet operated. In *poignant* for *poinant* the same principle is illustrated. Or again, the authority of history or of supposed history or of literary use may be called in as a guide to conscious use. The American defends the use of *guess* by the authority of

Chaucer, satisfying thus the craving for the ideal. In like manner an appeal is made to the authority of etymology to justify divergences from the common custom. The etymological theorist will not say *sympathy for*, because the word *sympathy* has for its first element a preposition which demands, in his eyes, the English preposition *with*. On the basis of etymology he refuses also to follow the general custom in the use of words like *aggravate*, in the sense of *annoy*, or *oblivious*, in the sense of *unobservant*; or to use a past participle like *soddened*.

(5) Variety of associative grouping in different minds also begets variety in the habits of language. A perfect and a completely diffused understanding of language on the side of its symbolic value would prevent difference of associative grouping. As it is, however, we do not find such rigidity of system in language. We do find, on the other hand, inconsequent and imperfect association groups with more or less fluctuation between the groups. Thus the speaker who says *God* (the vowel like that of *father*) may not use the same vowel in *dog*, but the broad vowel of *pshaw*; on the other hand, one who pronounces *dog* with the vowel of *father* is quite likely to use the vowel of *pshaw* in *God*. The same speaker may use the pronunciation *hoof* with the vowel of *good*, *roof* with the vowel of *school*, or may reverse them and pronounce *roof* like *good*, and *hoof* like *school*. Stock examples in syntax are the use of *shall* and *will*. The logical intent of all persons in the expression of thought by the means of these auxiliaries is the same. The difference in use arises from the difference in the associations which have gathered around the words. So also in the use of *like* as conjunction and *than* as preposition.

(6) When this difference of associational grouping becomes a little more positive it constitutes a difference of logical appeal. Certain variations due to the variety of logical appeal are freely accepted into community use, as are many of those due to differing associational grouping. Thus collective nouns may take a singular or a plural verb; or a subject like *The king with all his men* may be followed by a singular or a plural verb; or *kind* may be preceded by a plural or a singular demonstrative adjective.

(7) A final source of heterogeneity in language is the variety of connotative suggestion which the forms of speech may have. This is, of course, an extremely personal matter. All sorts of antipathies and likings arise out of different personal experiences

and associations. Another person's admirations and aversions are difficult to understand, and indeed in most instances, not being based upon reason, they are impossible to understand. Some time ago a crusade of newspaper correspondents was directed against the harmless phrase *All right*. Some of the participants managed to work themselves into a frenzy of disgust, scorn, and loathing for this locution. They called it common, vulgar, over-worked, meaningless, and all the other hard names they could think of. Their objections were none of them such as one not bitten with the same madness could understand; but for themselves they were sufficient and final. Since one must be personal here, the writer may be pardoned for citing a few of his own pet antipathies. The word *trip*, meaning vacation or journey, suggests unpleasant things, such as the August crowd at Atlantic City, and at the expense often of some effort the writer avoids using it. Likewise *view-point*, in spite of the example of *stand-point*, which is accepted, or of the similar compounds *makeshift*, *breakwater*, *turnkey*, etc., for some reason or other suggests to the writer everything that is linguistically cheap and tawdry. They are natural and reasonable words, but the logical defense carries no weight. Other similar antipathies are the words *retire*, meaning to *go to bed*; *presume*, meaning to *suppose*; *partial*, meaning *fond of*, as in *I am quite partial to peas*.

In all questions of law a matter of prime practical interest and importance is that of proper attitude toward law, of the kind of authority which the law should have, and the kind of obedience it may exact from those who are subject to it. First of all, it is plain that law in language as we have found it, that is, a trend or tendency of volitional development sometimes completing itself in the formation of habits, can have no absolute or mandatory power. As has already been pointed out, the power of the individual over language may extend to the complete negation of language; and this side of that extreme there is no law of speech which is not in one way or another conditioned by the willing acceptance of it on the part of the speaker.

The only restraining or restrictive power in language is that of damages. This is the only injunction that can be placed upon the operation of the laws of language. I am free to do as I will and you are free to do as you will. Nothing outside of language and nothing within language can establish a fixed procedure

which must be followed. Yet this freedom is never absolute. Activity in language is incited, is spurred on, by the desire of attaining an end, the desire of self-expression, of the persuasion or conviction of the thought of others; it is restrained, on the other hand, by the fear of damages. All use of language implies a combination of will-powers—my will power and yours, in the present instance. The desire to gain you for my side compels me to address you in as winning terms as I can command; and the fear of losing you prevents me from using any forms of language which I might suppose to be unintelligible to you or which I might suppose would arouse your hostility and antipathies. Between these two spurs of desire and fear I seek to find a middle ground on which I can satisfy myself and at the same time not offend others. Justice in language consists in this, in the right perception of my privilege of free and self-determining action in its relation to the actions of others about me. The damages resulting from a lack of this perception may be twofold. On the one side, I may suffer a loss of individuality by putting too great stress upon the demands of my audience. I may strive so hard not to offend that my use of language may be determined altogether by what I think will fall in with the habits and predilections of others. In that case I am likely to become insincere or so conventional and colorless that I shall not have anything to say that my audience would ever care to hear. On the other hand, there may be an excess of individuality. One may cultivate mannerisms and peculiarities of speech, tricks of style, as have extremists like Browning, Whitman, Meredith, Henry James, and many another, which may act to the damage of the speaker or writer. It is, of course, every man's duty to himself to determine just how far his individual peculiarities are acceptable to his fellow men. If they are too extreme he can then decide whether he will amend them and become more normal, more like his fellow men; or whether he will persist in them and suffer the charge of originality, or strangeness, or eccentricity, according to the degree of their novelty. But in every instance the question is not one of attaining an absolute standard, a fixed and legal right, but rather in taking one's position in a tendency of development at such a point as his powers of perception, his sense of the justice of the situation, lead him to suppose to be for him and for his circumstances the right point.

In biology it is customary to speak of any development of an

organization which impairs the vitality and power of self-perpetuation of the organism as degeneration. By this analogy we might speak of degeneration in language when it develops in such a way as to make it less effective for the purposes for which language exists. In this sense we may speak of right and wrong in language. That which makes language better, makes it a more effective organism, to continue the figure, is right; that which makes it less effective is wrong. It has already been pointed out that effectiveness in language must take account of two sides, the side of self-expression, of the individual, and the side of communication, of the recipient of the act of self-expression. On the side of communication it is obvious that the first necessity of right language is that the speaker or writer shall realize what the expressive value of his speech is to the public which he is addressing, what the general social trend or tendency is. This is the chief province of education in language. Such education begins, of course, with the first spoken word of the child, with the first realization of the symbolic value of language. And it continues all through his later life; in his reading, in his speaking with others, and in his writing, the child and man is continuously strengthening his sense of the general social and community value of language. He is continually adding to language on the symbolic side. But at the same time, vigorous minds are also adding to language on the self-expressive side. A speaker, if he wishes, may voluntarily act contrary to the accepted symbolic value of language, or he may act without the suggestion of any previous symbolic value, in which instances he either establishes a new symbolic value or remains unintelligible and therefore unproductive.

The question of the relative value of these two intentions in language—the symbolic, which tends to become the unconsciously volitional, the habitual, and the self-expressive, which tends to become the consciously volitional, the idiosyncratic—for the welfare of language, is important but somewhat difficult to answer. For the greater effectiveness of a language shall the more weight be attached to symbolic value or to that power of creation in language which is more positively expressive of individuality? In which direction does progress lie, in which degeneration? In the first place, it should be noted that any symbolic or general value which a form of expression may now have, must have had originally, as



was stated above, an individual value. The only way in which language grows, the only way in which it could have grown in the past, is by the creations of individuals, which afterwards were accepted by other individuals, who thus established a trend or tendency or law of the language. But it is inconceivable that anything like a trend or tendency should spring full grown into being. Language has at present its vast complicated powers of traditional and symbolic expression only because it has been in all the details of its vastness and complexness individually expressive. It follows, therefore, unless we suppose that language has reached its ultimate degree of expressiveness, that all future progress in language depends upon individual initiative. The conception of society in which there is no differentiation of individual from individual, but an absolute regularity of impulse and achievement, a complacent acquiescence in a codified and established system of human activity, whether possible as an actuality or not, cannot arouse much enthusiasm as an ideal. In such a society, however, the laws of language could be so formulated that they would not be disturbed by the freakishness of linguistic malcontents. But if our conception of the ideal society is of one continually bursting its bonds, of one which makes rules and laws only for the privilege of breaking them in order to form better, then individual differences must be permitted and encouraged. The interest and the profit of social intercourse must rest not on the principle of likeness and familiarity, but on the principle of diversity and originality. The old motto must be the watchword—an open road for talent. The justification for every innovation must be its success, and the success of every creation would be determined by the standard of its immediate present effectiveness. It would be the spirit of the law, in such a society, to depart from the law when effectiveness was served. Every new law would be right if it increased the possibilities of expression; every old law that in any way restrained expressiveness would be wrong, a mark of degeneracy. Uniformity would not in itself be a mark of excellence, but rather a danger signal, an indication of a sleeping and slothful spirit. Conventionality, regularity, would not be virtues, but vices, if they tended in the slightest to blur over individuality in order to produce a level of mediocre social understanding. Divergences and irregularity, provincialisms, localisms, and even vulgarisms, on the other hand, would be virtues, if they were the expressions of real characteris-



tics, the sincere expression of a people who lived their lives in such surroundings and conditions as nature had placed them in. Perhaps it may be permitted to quote here a paragraph from a recent and illuminating discussion of the dangers of an indiscriminating uniformity in social traditions and customs. The author is not speaking specifically of language, but of general social habits and ideals of conduct. 'I speak here,' says Professor Royce,<sup>1</sup> 'merely of tendencies. As you know, they are nowhere unopposed tendencies. Nor do I for an instant pretend to call even these levelling tendencies wholly or principally evil. But for the moment I call attention to what are obviously questionable, and in some degree are plainly evil, aspects of these modern tendencies. Imitation is a good thing. All civilization depends upon it. But there may be a limit to the number of people who ought to imitate precisely the same body of ideas and customs. For imitation is not man's whole business. There ought to be some room left for variety. *Modern conditions have often increased too much what one might call the purely mechanical carrying-power of certain ruling social influences.*<sup>2</sup> There are certain metropolitan newspapers, for instance, which have far too many readers for the good of the social order in which they circulate. These newspapers need not always be very mischievous ones. But when read by too vast multitudes, they tend to produce a certain monotonously uniform triviality of mind in a large proportion of our city and suburban population. It would be better if the same readers were divided into smaller sections, which read different newspapers, even if these papers were of no higher level. For then there would at least be a greater variety in the sorts of triviality which from day to day occupied their minds. And variety is the beginning of individual independence of insight and of conviction. As for the masses of people who are under the domination of the great corporations that employ them, I am here not in the least dwelling upon their economic difficulties. I am pointing out that the lack of initiative in their lives tends to make their spiritual range narrower. They are too little disposed to

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1. *Race Questions, Provincialisms and other American Problems*, pp. 76-78.

2. The italics are my own, not Professor Royce's. An instance in language is afforded by the 'purely mechanical carrying-power' of conventional or standard expression.

create their own world. Now every man who gets into a vital relation to God's truth becomes, in his own way, a creator. And if you deprive a man of all incentive to create, you in so far tend to cut him *off from God's truth*. Or in common language, independence of spirit flourishes only when a man at least believes that he has a chance to change his fortunes if he persistently wills to do so. But the servant of some modern forms of impersonal social organization tends to lose this belief that he has a chance. Hence he tends to lose his independence of spirit.'

These considerations, somewhat general and ideal though they are, have nevertheless their practical lesson for the student of language. Our vast schemes of uniform education throughout the country, in elementary schools, in high schools, and in colleges; our literature of newspapers, magazines, and novels, so general in its appeal that it sells from Maine to Texas and in the country village as well as in the town and city; these are the kind of influences which tend to make us forget that each community, each individual, has the right to create its own world. The conventions with which community and individual are surrounded often prevent the discovery of this appropriate and peculiar world. The best language is that, to return for a moment to the terminology of the biologists, which functions to its environment. It is only when language does this, that a true social understanding can be attained. It is a shallow notion of education which supposes that a uniform or standard English, merely by the fact of its being uniform, can bring about a higher degree of social sympathy and intelligence. In fact, social sympathy and intelligence are as likely to be prevented or hindered by a conventional legalized standard as they are to be helped. It is the tendency of the standard to cover over distinctions, to eradicate those marks by which one individual is appreciated as different from another. But the blotting out of the signs of distinctions is not the way to an increase of social intelligence and understanding. Since individuality is infinitely diverse, the appearance of regularity is blinding, is false and delusive. The true road towards community sympathy, towards community efficiency, in language as in all other social institutions, is through the recognition of the value, of the right, even of the duty, of individual variation based on the principle of truth to individual character and environment.













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